

Experience

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Being Christian means embracing an agenda. We are to love the Lord our God with our whole heart, our whole mind, our entire soul, all our strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Ever since Jesus first commissioned us, we have explored the meaning of this agenda in a thousand places, through a thousand epochs. In each local we have used certain focal words to talk about salvation. Today, as the 20th century slips into history, *experience* has come a focal word for Western understanding of how to live out the gospel.

Why "Experience"?

We must credit William James for raising the category of experience to the level general discussion in theology, pastoral work, and spiritual mentoring. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), he explored the meaning of religion particularly terms of "conversion" and "mystical" experiences. He gathered many accounts of intense, personal religious experiences and ascribed to them a critical function in religious living. Still, as an admitted atheistic pragmatist, he cut off his own access to the critical functions performed by dogma. That is, he could not allow himself to take as true the statements of people about the God they experienced. For James, their beliefs were merely evidence of a pattern of living, not of a Someone whom they experienced.

This focus on experience as the sole measure of one's relationship with God wormed its way into Christian spiritual reaching. Sad to say, it also imposed on any people a false sense of alienation from God. As spiritual mentors can attest, many Christians believe that they live far from God simply because they never consciously felt any exquisite sense of God. Or there can be found the belief, particularly among Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, that the spiritual life is a matter of pursuing the poignant religious experience -- a belief completely foreign to Scripture. The gospel, after all, is news. It is a proclamation of a truth, not a directive to wait upon experience for personal revelation. The truth is that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Rom 8:35-39), and presumably this includes dry religious feelings.

Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan have blazed a more direct trail to understanding the role of experience in the spiritual life. They began from

the revealed truth that God exists and acts on our behalf in Christ Jesus and the Spirit. By starting from revealed truth rather than from empirical data alone, they have extended the importance of experience in the spiritual life far beyond what James envisioned. Experience becomes a category within theological anthropology -- the study of humanity as graced by God. Experience, therefore, is somehow both human and divine, both immanent and transcendent. It is important to note that theological anthropology is one of the most significant developments in dogmatic theology since the high achievements of Nicaea and Chalcedon. Those early councils defined what God is like, based on Christians' experience of Jesus and the Spirit. Theological anthropology defines what we must be like if God's personal Word and Spirit can take up their eternal abode with us. As Vatican II has pointed out, "God has revealed humanity to humanity itself."

So a contemporary study of Christian spirituality should approach experience, not with the expectation that certain religious or mystical experiences are our high roads to God, but with the expectation that all human experiences make up God's humble path to us. Therefore we will examine the role of experience in God's self-gift to us through Word and Spirit. Our guiding question will be: *What divine role does experience play in a Christian's life in the Spirit?* In other words, our subject is not "intense religious experience," but the entire range of experience as it involves us with God.

We will begin by looking at certain features of human experience -- in particular, how experience is preconditioned, how it is the source of all meaning, and how it is ultimately ambiguous. After describing the ambiguities of experience, we will then look at how God's gifts of Word and Spirit resolve those ambiguities. Finally, we will describe how human experiences insert us into the life of the Trinity.

Experience Is Preconditioned

Experience is always an interaction of both inner and outer events. The inner events are made up of biological needs, instinctual fears, inherited worldviews, shared biases, and personally developed interests and aversions, loves and commitments. We do not take in life like a vacuum cleaner. We select. We focus our attention on certain experiences and exclude others. Experience has a built-in filtering system, and this filtering sifts every experience. Because these inner events precondition what our five senses see, hear, taste, feel, or smell, there is no such thing as "raw" experience. So there is no such thing as a "pure" religious experience, considered as a look at God without any internal preconditioning on our side. Also, the outer events themselves are not simply channeled to our brain through the five senses. Because we take life to be a drama, not a stream of data, meaningful experience is always in the form of a story. The data of the

senses are elements of a story, and we are interested in the story, not the data as such.

Most biblical authors wrote their stories in a literary style that did not articulate the inner events that shaped the story. When we hear of Moses seeing the burning bush or of Elijah hearing the sound of a gentle whispering wind, we can forget that besides the visible and audible outer events, there were inner events of belief, hope, desire, and commitment going on as well. Without these inner events of mind and heart, they would never have told the story, because Moses would not have noticed the bush, nor Elijah the breeze.

Each individual shapes his or her experiences in a unique way. Hypochondriacs notice every ache and itch in their bodies rather than practical issues at hand. If philosophers walk into trees, artists stumble into debates, preoccupied by their own concerns. Mystics notice their heart's yearning to be drawn beyond all worldly cares. No doubt the Apostle Matthew was musing on something other than tax records when Jesus invited him to follow. The sight of religious zealots crushing Stephen to death with stones may have profoundly reoriented a readiness that St. Paul already had to experience the initiatives God had in mind for him.

The richness of a person's experience will therefore depend on habits of noticing. A boy in high school may realize that he should apply his mind to understanding the subject he is studying rather than to the clever manipulation of words to impress teachers. He increasingly notices the world presented by his teachers more than his teachers' attitudes toward him. Conversely, many are the tourists who are so preoccupied with taking pictures that they fail to meet the foreigner whose land they visit. They never experienced what they didn't notice.

Some people never fully realize the power they have to enrich their personal experiences. It is chiefly a matter of wanting to notice. Those who want to live in conscious love of God have to take charge of their noticing. They will begin to notice whatever relates to their agenda to love God and neighbor. They start noticing the quiet pull on their hearts to be honest, courageous, and caring. Gradually they grow accustomed to noticing the precise quality of that pull. They learn to taste the difference between a true pull and a false pull. Sometimes they so yearn to see the Source of that pull that they drop the baggage of practical concerns and arrive empty handed before God in mystical union.

Taking charge of one's own noticing is a prolonged and difficult process. That is because our experience is preconditioned not only by personally developed interests but by biological needs that we can never fully control. Without essential food, water, clothes, or shelter, our experiences will focus merely on the search for survival. Today substance addiction (drugs, alcohol)

ravages far more than the bodies of addicts; it narrows the range of their minds and subordinates their friendships, family ties, and jobs to a growing obsession with ingesting a chemical.

One's biological system not only determines needs but shapes a person's values as well. We have become aware that differences in our biological genders have a significant impact on how we each develop morally. For example, some people say that women value personal relations over projects, while men set projects over personal relations. Theorists may argue whether biology or culture ultimately conditions such a preference. But eventually we want to know: How do a man and a woman talk to each other? Are a person's preferences reliable? There is a difference, after all, between bias and perspective. A woman has to distinguish between a threatening male bias and a helpful male perspective in what a man says, as must a man for a woman's statements. It is an unending work.

The work of filtering bias from perspective also applies to race, chronological age, and nationality. Our skin color, age, and provenance are not mere information about us; they confine us within a particular world of both wisdom and foolishness. Many people take their world as wise and others' as foolish – but there are others who think the same of them. To escape that confinement, it is not enough to perceive what others value. The first step in becoming liberated is to perceive that we ourselves experience our world with a mixture of bias and wisdom.

Experience Is the Source of Meaning

Although our experience may be shaped by gender, race, age, and nationality, this does not mean that we do not ask fresh questions. Our uneasiness with old answers that make no sense of new situations liberates us from the confines of the past. But if a liberation from the past is not to be a heavy-handed rejection of everything old, there is something we have to recognize about past achievements: All old answers, when they were fresh, sprung from somebody's experience. Let us put this more strongly: Nothing we hold to be true or valuable entered history outside of somebody's experience. Our beliefs about what makes good parents, about human rights, and about the lifestyles of foreigners have their source in something happening to somebody, somewhere, sometime. The ideas by which we set up our social institutions of language, law, education, health care, economics, technology, and politics spring from people's experience. All the religious practices and liturgical rites that give us ways to express ourselves before God originated in our forebears' experiences in particular circumstances.

To be specific, our beliefs about salvation in Jesus and the Spirit, about the afterlife, about the Virgin Mary, about sin, and so on, were originally

someone's understanding of his or her own experience. But we must ask, What kind of experiences raise in us such questions about our relationship to God? Does everyday experience really have such religious meaning? If we look merely at the particular things we want and the grandiose institutions we set up to get them, there is little evidence of anything religious. Yet in all our particular experiences, despite the contradictions and tensions that harass us, we simultaneously experience an abiding yen for harmony, peace, and fulfillment. We feel that each particular experience is a potential step toward that fine goal. Once we begin to notice this transcendental desire in ourselves, we discover that we want ultimate good in everything we do. We want the meaning of the particular passages of our lives to contribute to a single symphony that ultimately resolves all tensions and themes. It is not pious talk that makes us "religious." "Religious experience" is not restricted to a deep consciousness of the God we know. The authentic religious life develops whenever we notice the transcendent invitation in every experience of wholesome desire. Experience is religious when we recognize that good desires are received, not fabricated, and when we deliberately search out the One who calls us by this gift of desire.

People growing more deeply aware of God notice the workings of desire in their ordinary experience. From ordinary experience they will find God. Going in the reverse direction, they will look for the meaning of any traditional doctrine or practice within the data of their personal experience. They will find meaning in doctrines about God by returning to experience. They will turn the other cheek because they believe that this lifestyle made sense out of Jesus' personal experience. They will turn the other cheek also because they tried it and discovered the meaning in their lives. It is important to recognize that Jesus validated his high spiritual principles by his experience. Even when self-sacrificing love drove Jesus to the cross, he did not go out of blind obedience to an abstract principle. Jesus went to the cross because his experience taught him that self-giving is better than self-securing. Likewise, our faith does not just acknowledge the importance of Christian principles; faith also moves us to meditate on how these principles gave meaning to Jesus' experience -- and on how they might give meaning to our own.

Our faith, after all, is ultimately built on the faith experiences of the first disciples of Jesus. As the Church began to spread, the lively faith of those who walked and ate with Jesus became the primary evidence for newcomers that the message and style of Jesus are truly life-giving. Throughout history, we know, traditions lost their meaning when people grew oblivious to actual people of faith and merely repeated formulas and performed rituals governed by rubrics. Suddenly a maverick appeared who wanted faith to make sense out of everyday experience. Then a reform of tradition began,

because the Spirit in people recognized the cosmic Christ in the flesh of the reformer.

There is an important political significance to the fact that experience is the source of meaning. Precisely because it is *somebody's* originating experience, that somebody becomes an authority. A person who has experienced the Lord at work in history becomes someone whom others want to consult. They want to understand the significance of that engendering experience and to guide the course of its meaning as it develops in different contexts. In Luke's writings, Peter and the apostles form the official center of a larger group of disciples, all of whom have authority to preach and baptize because they experienced Jesus. Paul legitimizes his claim to be called an apostle by appealing to his experience of the risen Christ. In John's Gospel, Mary of Magdala and the Beloved Disciple are the chief spiritual authorities in the Church because of their tender affection for Jesus. But John's Gospel was written long after it dawned on Christians that all the contemporaries of Jesus were going to die, so he advises, 'Happy are those who do not see and yet believe.' Continuing authority, in other words, depends on the continuing experience of love and fidelity to Jesus, under the guidance of the Spirit. In principle, at least, Christians expect those who hold positions of authority to have earned that authority through experience of life in the pattern of Christ rather than merely to have accepted a title, robe, and ring.

Notice how the thesis that experience is the source of meaning clarifies the purpose of "meditation." Many men and women meditate on mere concepts -- how Jesus had the virtue of humility and therefore could lower himself to speak to the woman at the well. Yet real life reveals its meaning through the lens of experience. Therefore meditation should be a matter of gaining the inner sense of another's experience and finding resonances in one's own experience. Much better to meditate on what moved Jesus to overcome Jewish taboos against speaking to a Samaritan woman. Better to consider what religious, national, or gender taboos I experience in my spiritual life and how I might be liberated to overcome them. Again, these are matters of concrete authority, not abstract virtue. When we meditate on how Judith or Jeremiah responded to a divine invitation, it helps greatly to ask ourselves, How did this person accept the call to take charge of a situation? How did they deal with the religious authorities that stood in their way? By meditating on authority, we carry on the tradition of the real saints and reformers in the Church, who were preoccupied with how to mediate God's authority in a world of usurpers.

Experience Is Ambiguous

Experience may provide the basic elements of all meaning. It is another matter to discover what the meaning of any experience may be. Experience

by itself, including all the preconditioned meanings and inner attitudes that go with it, remains ambiguous. In other words, experience does not yield up its true meaning easily. Because, as we saw, experience is an interaction of both outer and inner events, we will find the stubbornness of experience both in our psyches and in our stories. On the story side, we find the behavior of others strange, the meaning of everyday talk elusive, our solutions to ordinary problems provisional. Most Christians who read the Bible suffer a hermeneutical shock when they realize that the inspired text is not plain; it is subject to the interpretation of the uninspired. On the psyche side, we find that we sometimes turn away from the meaning of experience. The neurotic, for example, represses certain personal questions that might bring understanding about feelings. The self-centered person cunningly ignores questions about the welfare of the neighbor. Most communities show passionate intelligence about their own welfare but are ploddingly slow to gain insight into the good of other communities and into the larger common good that would benefit a network of communities. Finally, all people seem to suffer an intellectual laziness that refuses to push questions to their limit when short term answers are patently inadequate. These viruses on the body of meaning infect all of us to some extent. Think of any school, company, or family. Such institutions are always a mishmash of good ideas and nonsense, and the struggle to sift one from the other is unending.

Religious feelings also are ambiguous experiences that beg clarification. When those feelings lift us up to an exquisite sense of God, we still must return to ordinary life and put the lessons of that encounter to the test. Teresa of Avila and Ignatius Loyola experienced intense spiritual consolations that turned out to be untrustworthy. Similarly in the liturgy, the adequacy of specific songs, movements, art and architecture does not depend on the strength of the feelings they evoke; the adequacy of any Christian ritual depends instead on the worth of the gospel values to be celebrated. Sometimes those values call for simple joy rather than high excitement; other times they call for flamboyant celebration rather than sober formulations of contentment.

Nor are religious thoughts exempt from the ambiguity of experience. If the example of the disciples of Jesus tells us anything about faith, it says that it takes great effort and much error to understand Jesus, even though they had already set their hearts on him. What Christian can easily formulate what the "good news" really is? It seems to be a rule that the closer our experience approaches love, the more difficult we find it to understand, even after we have taken the plunge.

In the history of spirituality we find that mystical experience itself is ambiguous. Mystics do not easily explain what happened to them. For most kinds of mystical experiences, a discernment of spirits is necessary to determine whether the experience is truly from God. Also, we should not

forget the political side to mysticism. Although works abound on the psychological experience of mysticism, spiritual writers have paid little attention to how it legitimates ecclesial power, despite the common experience of awe that a mystic engenders in the average person. A look at history shows that the mystics honored by Catholics were essentially reformers: Paul, Augustine, Ignatius Loyola, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross. Whatever their intentions, their accounts of mystical experiences gave them moral weight in the eyes of anyone who might question the integrity of the reforms they envisioned. Catholic authorities used St. Margaret Mary's visions of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to legitimate an affective response to the overly rationalist Enlightenment, even though she herself lacked the capacity to organize such a reform. The Middle Ages recognized the dangers of mysticism's political power. The visionary teachings of Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202) threatened to demolish the hierarchical structure of the Church, so authorities condemned his writings. Authorities also condemned the mystical teachings of the Dominican Meister Eckhart (d. 1328), more by force of Franciscan envy of his moral power than by rational assessment of his works. So the Church has wisely held, at least in principle, that mystical experience by itself does not unerringly reveal meaning and authorize its recipient.

Besides the ambiguities of our experience of neurosis, egoism, and shortsightedness, besides the ambiguities of our experience of religious feelings, thoughts, and mysticism, there are two further ambiguities present in all experience: the ambiguity of hope and the ambiguity of time.

The Ambiguity of Hope

First we should note that all our experiences occur while we silently nurse a question of hope or despair. Imagine a man who, through no fault of his own, suffers from melancholy, failure, or rejection. His taste for life has departed, and meaning has fled his ordinary experience. Hopelessness shapes the meaning of each everyday experience, and yet something hopeful must be burning within. Why else would he carry on? Imagine a woman who, through personal ambition, has grown wealthy and powerful. Her successes have made her only more rabid about the climb to heights she dreams she will stop and enjoy. But she never stops and enjoys. Every step is part of a hopeful climb that could end in despair.

In either case, it is unlikely that this man and woman could speak unequivocally about their personal hope or despair. Their experience feels like a mixture of both. The only time we can speak with any conviction about a person's hope or despair is at death. Here the final threads of the tapestry of life have been cut, and no further weavings of experience can change the appearance of the whole. Among all the preconditionings of our everyday

experience that stem from parents and our culture, one of the most important is the preconditioning that hope or despair brings.

Concretely, we experience hope's ambiguity in the gap between our *hopes* and our *hope*. Our *hopes* are made up of concrete goals -- what we hope for our children, for our health, for our career, for our loved ones. Our *hope* is another matter. Hope is about what it will mean to realize or fail to realize our individual hopes. A woman can have fulfilled her life's dreams, and yet if she is still unhappy, she finds that success has not sustained her. She fulfilled her hopes but lacks hope. Or a man can fail to achieve his goals and yet discover a quiet expectation in his heart that all shall be well anyway. His hopes are dashed, but he is filled with hope. We must ask, On what do we pin our specific hopes? How can we tell, in everyday experience, that pursuing this or that particular set of hopes is an exercise of hope in life's ultimate meaning? We do not know for sure. Hope is neither certitude nor conviction that our decisions are on target. Hope is rather a felt assurance that even poor decisions will not rob our lives of meaning, in spite of our inability to explain why.

The Ambiguity of Time

The other ambiguity present in all experience regards time. Our experience of the passing of time is unlike our ways of measuring time. When we are bored, "time" passes slowly; when we are active, it passes quickly. We know that the clock hasn't sped up or slowed down. There is something in experience correspondingly slowing down or speeding up. We watch the clock, but we are comparing measured time against some inner timepiece. They say time passes quickly when you're having fun; it also passes quickly when you're working productively. Without meaningful recreation or work, time drags. So our inner timepiece seems to measure the flow of experience by meaning, not by seconds. The more meaning, the faster the flow of experience goes, and vice versa. The human thirst for meaning, therefore, is the inner timepiece that keeps glancing at clocks, not simply to know the hour but to measure the meaningfulness of one's life.

We cannot restrict the meaningfulness of experience to each particular moment of experience. We string our experiences together to form a pattern, to give a direction, to weave partial experiences into something significant and lasting. Whether or not we admit it, we all feel an urgency to make something of ourselves before the death bell tolls. Our experience of time, therefore, finds its meanings in the making of our personal story within history -- not written history, but the actual series of experiences about which historians write.

Still, even without a written history, we do live our lives according to a personal image of how our story fits into history. This image is not a written

or conceptual philosophy of history. Our image of history is fixed by how we imagine the work of everyday living that everyone is involved in. More significantly, our image of history covertly but powerfully shapes our spirituality. The problem is that our images of history differ from one another, and each person can point to experience for validation. To illustrate, and to demonstrate this ambiguity of our experience of time, let us look at four images of history that everyday experience reinforces.

1. History is cyclic. The image of the circle suggests that the laws that govern the visible universe are essentially the same as the laws that govern history. Thus history is a repeating process of cultures rising and declining, and although specific cultures may appear unique, the same circular processes determine their ups and downs everywhere. Children repeat the sins and successes of their parents. Our individual efforts are but minor churning within some suprahistorical inevitability. So the author of Ecclesiastes concludes that there is nothing really new under the sun. This vision is preservative in character. It models experience after the orderly cycles of sunrise and sunset. Time is a circle, and we should learn the lesson this time around or there will be trouble on the next turn. All we can do is keep faithful to what we know is good. This preservative spirituality is at its best when not a word of God falls to the ground without being accomplished. This image favors Matthew's Gospel, which downplays the unpredictable gusts of the Holy Spirit and sanctions the stabilizing authority of the apostles. At its worst, spiritual fascists canonize the limpest human opinions, nullifying the unexpected work of the Infinite Spirit.

2. History is random. Here everything is new, special, particular, and surprising. The varieties of sin and grace are infinite. God exercises divine dominion over history by acting without warning and without apology. This vision is interruptive in character. It models experience after the suddenness of lightning and earthquakes, shooting stars and rainbows. Time is a vertical arrow up to eternity. There is only the present moment and both kinds of luck. All we can do is expect that God will give us sufficient resources in time of trouble. Spirituality is ultimately based on trust. At its best, this vision embraces the rejects of society because each person, each moment, is Christ. It favors John's Gospel, which sanctifies the present moment, making the end-time always the present time. At its worst, it rejects all long-range planning and absents itself from the common struggle to discover the balance between taking and relinquishing control.

3. History is progressing. In this image history is becoming something predetermined, like maple seeds becoming maple trees. Especially in the 20th century, science had marked human life by unprecedented creativity on many fronts, and so the progressive character of history is impressed upon us all. It models experience after the growth of flowers, of children, and after the modern-day sense of evolution. We find it difficult to imagine ever

losing the cultural ground gained by science and the arts. Time is an arrow upon whose arc we are gradually rising. God calls us to make the world a better place than we found it. Spirituality is essentially creation-centered. At its best, this vision finds good in all things and seizes every opportunity to bring grace to the world. It favors Luke's Gospel and Acts, which dote on the seed metaphor, following the spread of the Word and Spirit to Jerusalem and then to Rome. At its worst, it ignores human malice, foolishness, and the horrors they spawn. It feels no need for mercy.

4. History is struggle. Here every human event is the result of the collision of contradictory forces. Suffering is the only mother of wisdom. We do not receive life, we fight for it. This vision is dialectical in character. It models experience after the law of the jungle and the battles between opposing desires within the psyche. Time is the bell sounding the end of the final round, when the winner will be announced. God calls us not to create the kingdom but merely to fight for it. Spirituality is centered on the discernment of spirits. At its best, this vision has uncovered the locus of sin and grace within the arena of human desires. It favors Mark's Gospel and some of Paul's letters, which depict the arrival of God as an inner battle of spirits. At its worst, it justifies hating one's enemy and mounting holy wars against anyone deemed different.

While few people cling exclusively to one of these images of the workings of history, most people favor one over another as ways to make sense out of their experience. Both our experience of nature and our reading of the Bible can find evidence supporting our image. Yet, pushed to its limits, no image alone seems to represent adequately the reality of history as revealed by the gospel. Spiritual mentors can illuminate the spiritualities of their mentees by making connections between their imaginal preconception of the workings of history and any experience that seems critical to their spiritual life. This is no small benefit. Yet mentors would fail in their fundamental responsibility if they were unable to state clearly what revelation says about the nature of historical process.

The Experience of Grace

We do not need to rely on the Bible alone to find testimony to the existence of grace. Our own experience and the best fiction bear witness to the phenomenon that when we are at our lowest, we often experience sudden resources. We experience these resources in different ways. I may experience a clarity of moral vision. I may feel the courage to act for the sake of my neighbors. Or I may feel an optimism lifting me above all obstacles. I cannot explain how these resources spurted up from my psyche. I did not decide to experience them. I may have wished for them, but they occurred without my devising.

These experiences always have two poles – one in our consciousness and the other in the external situation. For example, we decide to confide in an acquaintance at work. Deciding that he or she is trustworthy is an internal movement responding to an external appearance. This is the experience of faith -- no different in structure than the experience of the first Christians seeing in Jesus of Nazareth a person worthy of ultimate trust. Or suppose we discover ourselves making a long-distance call that we promised ourselves we would make to console a lonely friend. Love in our hearts impels us to care for a person whose story beckons us from without. This is the experience of charity. Or think of the times when, after the dark nights of despair over the decay of one's city, we awake with an unexpected courage to continue working to bring order out of chaos. The inner burst of courage meets the outer spectacle of a city breaking apart. This is the experience of hope.

The experience of grace is the experience of faith, charity, or hope, with each kind having one foot in hearts and the other in history. Yet, as we experience these events, we do not necessarily recognize them as grace. Logic cannot deduce that these experiences are anything more than the human spirit responding to human values. It is the event of Christian conversion, sudden or gradual, that leads a person to the conviction that God is at work both in our hearts and in our history. During the first four centuries after Christ, Christians reflecting on their experience could not avoid acknowledging that such experiences are, in reality, the inner expression of God's Spirit welcoming the outer expression of God's Word. No doubt the gift of faith itself leads to this conviction. Faith, the first fruit of conversion, recognizes itself as a gift in experience, and the full horizon of the world opens up to those who believe.

Faith, then, is the door to the truth that resolves the ambiguities of experience. Faith is essentially a judgment of value: It is good to do this; it is good to believe that. Faith is the compass that guides the fickle meanderings of religious feelings and thoughts. No matter how miserable we feel, the truth is that God loves us, and all shall be well. Or no matter to what mystical heights religious fervor lifts us, we return to the realities of daily life to work out our charity in hope. Like the disciples descending the Mount of the Transfiguration, we look up and see only Jesus, and he is yet to be crucified.

While revelations of values or truths by faith are the fundamental religious experiences, feelings and thoughts play a supportive role. That is why spiritual mentors serve well by dishing up the plain truth without emotional and discursive garnish. The feelings and thoughts of those they guide ought to flow from a personal experience of faith, not from the mentor's enthusiasm. That is also why spiritual mentors should have savored the saving dogmas themselves far more than doting on psychological analysis.

The ambiguities of everyday experience are met by judgments of value and fact springing from being in love with God, not from psychology or systematic theology alone. The test of faith, of course, is not belief but action. The test of faith is charity -- welcoming the stranger, visiting the imprisoned. So the mentor should direct attention not only to the values and truths revealed in Christ Jesus but also to the everyday experience of being moved to care for others actively.

The experience of hope is somewhat different. Even when God graces us with an eye for what is best and with the determination to act on it, our experience remains ambiguous in the sense that we cannot control outcomes. The outer aspect of hope is a story yet unfinished. We can only act with a faith and charity that rely on hope. Our hope is essentially a confident desire that the kingdom is indeed coming, very likely through the crucifixions behind us and ahead of us. We fix our hope on the truth that in Jesus God has spoken a superabundant Word, a Word that cannot reveal divinity more than it has because the Father has given everything to the Son. We fix our hope also on the truth that in our hearts God-Spirit will personally search and welcome the incarnation of Christ Jesus in everyday life.

Besides speaking to the ambiguity of hope, revelation also speaks to the ambiguity of time. The Spirit in us, cherishing the story of Christ, recognizes that history is predominantly dialectical. Certainly the conservative, interruptive, and progressive routines that stir in our bones and govern much of the world's workings have their place. But we get insight into the *meaning* of nature only by seeing its effect on human beings. The incessant desire we experience to control things -- usually through some combination of the conservative, interruptive, and progressive kinds of governance -- is ultimately subject to a dialectic of human desires. We experience both an attraction and a repulsion regarding the same people. We want to control situations but know that there is a point at which we should give up control. Even when we are settled within ourselves about the best course of action, there is the neighbor to contend with.

Look at the life of Jesus. The conservative instinct to obey religious laws yielded to inner impulses to cure on a day of rest and to dump the money tables in the Temple. Jesus' advice to trust like the birds of the air and to rely totally on God's interruptive grace was counterbalanced by a canny suspicion of most religious authorities and a wisdom he compared to the wiles of a snake. Jesus delivered his progressive mandate to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth in tandem with his prediction that his disciples would be crucified. Most patent, of course, is the dichotomy between Jesus' assurance that the kingdom is arriving and his agonizing cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46). We believe in faith that the kingdom arrives, but only through a death and resurrection.

The cross, we remember, is a sign of *blessing* that we make upon our bodies and each other, often with little thought of its dialectical significance.

The experience of grace is always an experience of being snatched from some kind of threat. It is essentially dialectical. Practically speaking, we juggle that dialectic by two kinds of discernment. On the inner side of experience, we discern the stirrings in our psyches. For this the classical rules for discernment of spirits have sustained many throughout the centuries. On the outer side, however, there has been a strange lack of rules in the Christian tradition for the discernment of stories. False stories have recognizable features. They tend to eliminate certain groups of people from consideration. They fence out the experiences of people who are demoralized, angry, rejected, or impoverished. They are essentially group propaganda. Or they may glorify some person instead of some action, focusing on who someone is and not what someone does. (For example, look at the vocation ads run by many seminaries.) This glorifying feature usually mystifies the hearer, fostering an admiration that destroys self-esteem and deters taking responsibility. Most importantly, they draw an image of history that either is not dialectical or, if dialectical, is a simplistic pitting of friends against enemies. In any case, discernment of stories is just as important as discernment of spirits in living the shrewd spiritual life.

The Divine Role of Experience

We can now answer our guiding question: What divine role does experience play in a Christian's life in the Spirit? To a great extent, we have answered the question already. Experience is a test of truth; it is a ground of true authority; and it is ambiguous without the further experiences of faith, charity, and hope. When we distinguish immanence and transcendence in human experience, we are only distinguishing aspects of events that are simultaneously earth-bound and heaven-headed. God is at work in all experience that we may think relates only to earthly matters.

Even the experience of sin is experience of sin against the transcendent pull of consciousness. Whether or not we recognize it, all experience is religious experience, although in everyday speech we call "religious" only those experiences whose transcendence we recognize.

To reach the fullest answer to our question, we must look at the role of experience within God's loving purpose. Human experience is God's idea to accomplish a loving purpose. To put it precisely, experience is the double channel of God's gift of self to us. Let us explore this more thoroughly.

God saw fit to share the eternal, divine self with nondivine creatures who become what they are over time. This share in the divine self is total. That is, we are able not merely to feel the effects of God; God made us potential recipients of God as God really is. We can become divine, sharing in the

divinity of Christ, who emptied himself to share our humanity. If a metaphor be allowed, we are genetically coded to be God's image and likeness, making us real offspring of God. We can act in real collaboration with God, and we experience in time the inner plurality of the eternal Trinity.

One formulation of the inner life of God runs as follows: God eternally utters and welcomes. The Word that God utters is God. The welcome with which God receives the Word is God. The Utterer, the Word, and the Welcome are distinct but meaningless without each other. These distinctions in God do not contradict divine unity. For example, when we appreciate our own wise decisions, we can distinguish the self that decides, the decision, and our appreciation of ourselves having decided. Also, we become better persons, more perfect, more at one with ourselves, having made such decisions. In other words, we can verify in our experience that plurality can enhance and not contradict unity.

The terms *uttering and welcoming* in God do not unequivocally illuminate what God is like. They are only our terms for saying something about distinctions in God. They give a good analogy for how the inner plurality in God can account for God's perfection and unity. Yet, given revelation in history, we can go beyond mere analogy to form a *relative* understanding of our own uttering and welcoming that points to God as their ultimate meaning. Besides analogy, we have a method of "indicative signification" to understand the Trinity. We can point to our own uttering and welcoming and say that their full significance, hidden from us in time, lies in a parallel two processions in God. To the extent that we understand the history-bound meanings of God's Word and Spirit, it is the eternal God whom we understand in a partial way.

In a moment of pious reflection, we might thank God for entering our lives through both inner and outer experience. Yet a little further reflection shows this wonderful match to be more than a happy coincidence. The only reason God structured us to encounter reality through inner and outer experiences is to enable us to receive God as God really is -- eternally uttering and welcoming the divine self, eternally uttering the Word and eternally loving in Spirit. In other words, we have both inner and outer aspects to our experiences so that God can come to us as Word in our history and as Spirit in our hearts. The double character of human experience is God's kind idea to invent creatures who could share in the intimacy of divine life as it really is.

As God utters the divine self beyond time, our "uttering" consists in incarnating divine values and behavior for others to experience in time. We become part of the divine outer Word to others with Christ, the head of the body of which we are members. We are paragraphs filling out the story of Christ. As God welcomes the divine self above time, our "welcoming"

consists in searching out and appreciating divine values and behavior whenever we experience them in time.

Yet, because we live in a world of sin, our uttering and welcoming take place in dialectical struggle. We struggle to become the good persons for others to experience. Others will always struggle to discern what part of our story, our conduct and language, is a saving word for them. We writhe in Spirit over the lack of a divine Word in the world. We agonize with God as Spirit in the great act of childbirth to bring life to the world.

Into this world of struggle-not of determinism, not of randomness, not of an automatic progress -- we are born to experience God's compassion in us by uttering and welcoming God's Word.

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